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AUTHOR Bumpus, J. Frank
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ABSTRACT

A model that conceptualizes career stress for faculty members and that suggests options for enhancing career vitality is considered. The model draws upon attribution theory, the locus of control in work of Julian Rotter and the literature of depression by Martin E. P. Seligman. It suggests that perceived causes, or attributions, are directly related to felt stress. The three dimensions of attributions involve pervasiveness (global vs. specific), locus (internal vs. external), and permanence (stable vs. unstable). These dimensions carry across at least three sets of consequences: chronicity or time, generality or transferability, and self-esteem or personal impact. The model suggests that the most negative and pervasive attributions would be global-internal-stable. With regard to a faculty member who has low vitality and career enjoyment, global factors predict the expectation of low vitality to recur even when new academic situations arise, while attributions to specific factors predict malaise will change with the circumstances. Internal attributions for low vitality would perceive causal factors to such intra-person dimensions as low ability or limiting personality, while external attributions would involve environmental factors, such as the academic climate. Low vitality attributed to stable dimensions involves chronicity (i.e., whether the cause of low vitality will persist or is episodic). It is concluded that understanding satisfaction and stress in terms of various career stages is important to dealing with low vitality, as are institutional personnel policies and professional development opportunities. (SW)

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CAREER VITALIZATION AND STRESS AMONG PROFESSORS: AN ATTRIBUTIONAL MODEL

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J. Frank Bumpus
Associate Professor Psychology
Linfield College
McMinnville, Oregon 97128

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ABSTRACT

CAREER VITALIZATION AND STRESS AMONG PROFESSORS: AN ATTRIBUTIONAL MODEL

J. Frank Bumpus
Associate Professor Psychology
Linfield College
McMinnville, Oregon 97128

Various economic, demographic, and institutional factors are likely to contribute to heighten levels of career-related stress among faculty members. A model is provided in the paper to conceptualize career stress and suggest options for enhancing career vitality. Aspects of chronicity and generality of devitalization can be predicted from the model. The paper draws upon attribution theory, locus of control literature, and theories on depression.

CAREER VITALIZATION AND STRESS AMONG PROFESSORS: AN ATTRIBUTIONAL MODEL

Problem Statement

For the past 20 years the flexibility and vitality of college and university professors have been maintained through expanding programs and mobility from one position to another. This period of expansion and mobility seems to have ended. Morale is threatened as faculty perceive a steady decline in the range of career options, reduced research monies, and decreases in the pool of future students. Furthermore, the needs of colleges and universities as well as their students are likely to change more rapidly than the composition of their faculties.

Purpose of Paper

This paper will describe a model which would both conceptualize career stress among academics and suggest options for enhancing career vitality. The model will draw upon attribution theory, the locus of control in work of Julian Rotter, and the literature of depression by Martin E. P. Seligman.

Career Devitalization Model

The learned helplessness work by Seligman (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978) describes various cognitive, motivational, and emotional linkages to the experience of uncontrollability. Cognitive deficits spring from the expectation that desired outcomes are uncontrollable. Motivational deficits are shown by reduced initiative of voluntary behaviors. And, emotional deficits are shown in various responses suggesting aspects of depression.

A variety of environmental factors particular to the milieu of higher education may contribute to learned helplessness responses among professors. High achieving individuals accustomed to considerable influence in their

environment may, by virtue of pressures and changes which they are increasingly unable to control, be more likely to evidence helplessness-related responses.

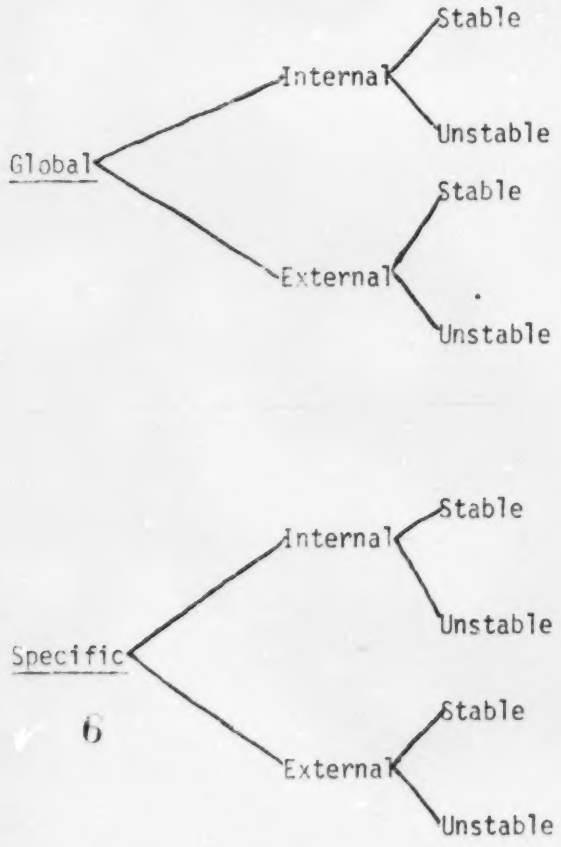
Allied with learned helplessness are the conceptions growing out of the locus of control literature. Some evidence (Prociuk & Breen, 1975) would support the assumption that professors may tend to be more internally oriented than the general population. However, the pressures of higher education may be viewed as factors pushing professors toward externality. Langer (1979) argues that illusions of incompetence are produced by forced relinquishing of control. The highly internal person may be particularly vulnerable to the pressures of restricted personal influence, job instability, and other institutionally generated tensions. While much of the literature on Rotter's locus of control construct tends to view internality as the desirable mode, there is evidence internals may be particularly vulnerable to some stressful situations (Gilbert & Mangelsdorff, 1979; Stebbins & Stone, 1977). The high level of perceived control which professors may have enjoyed in obtaining their education and utilized in the work place may predispose them to unrealistic notions of environmental control and self-control. Rotter (1975) has argued that there is probably a curvilinear relationship between locus of control and adjustment. Individuals in the middle of the I-E continuum may have fewer difficulties in dealing with stressful events than individuals falling at either end of the continuum.

Some further suggestions of the usefulness of the I-E constructs for viewing the professors' environment can be made. Factor analytic studies suggest I-E may be composed of notions about the justness, political responsiveness, and predictability of one's surroundings (Collins, 1974, and Duffy, Shiflett, & Downey, 1977). The academic environment may be particularly unique in terms of valuing these dimensions.

The learned helplessness model has been revised (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) to draw upon attribution theory. People attribute perceived

TABLE I. PERCEIVED CAUSES, OR ATTRIBUTIONS, OF CAREER STRESS: DIMENSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

ATTRIBUTIONAL DIMENSIONS



ATTRIBUTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Chronicity (Time)	Generality (Transferability)	Self-Esteem (Personal Impact)
Chronic	General	Lowered self-esteem
	General	Lowered self-esteem
Chronic	General	
	General	
Chronic		Lowered self-esteem
		Lowered self-esteem
Chronic		

noncontinuity, and the resulting helplessness, to a cause. This cause can be internal or external, specific or global, stable or unstable. This model can suggest, depending on the perceived source of noncontingency, whether helplessness will be chronic or acute, pervasive or focused, and whether self-esteem will be lowered.

Table I indicates the structure which is the basis for the career devitalization model proposed in this paper. (The table is adapted from Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978.) The model would suggest that perceived causes, or attributions, are directly related to felt-stress. Attributions to global factors suggest the expectation will persist even when the situation changes. Attributions to specific factors predict changes in expectation may accompany changes in the situation. Internal and external attributions draw upon the locus of control literature (Rotter, 1975). Internal perceptions involve expectations within the person and external perceptions involve environmental, outside-of-person, expectations. An attribution to stable factors suggests the expectation will carry across considerable time, while attributions to unstable factors indicate the expectation need not persist over time. It is important to note that each of these three dimensions is a continuum even though in this discussion they may seem to be treated as dichotomous entities.

Thus in Table I the three dimensions of attributions involve Pervasiveness (global vs. specific), Locus (internal vs. external) and Permanence (stable vs. unstable). These dimensions carry across at least three sets of consequences: chronicity or time, generality or transferability, and self-esteem or personal impact.

Consider a professor whose sense of vitality and enjoyment in his career is rather low. Within this attribution model there are eight kinds of assumptions he can make about the cause of this lack of vitality (Global-Specific X Internal-External X Stable-Unstable). This array of perceived causes has wide implications for the individual and the probability he will

have the necessary belief structure and take the necessary actions to improve vitality.

According to this model, (Table I) if the person makes any of the four global attributions for low vitality this deficit and the related behaviors will be very general or transferable both across time and various areas of the person's life. These global attributions suggest to the individual that when he confronts new teaching, research, committee situations the low vitality outcomes will be just as he has experienced in the past. Global factors predict the expectation of, for example, low vitality, to recur even when new academic situations arise. Attributions to specific factors predict the expectation for future career malaise need not recur when the situation changes.

The four internal attributions for low vitality would attribute causal factors to such intra-person dimensions as low ability, limiting personality factors, or inadequate knowledge. These attributions lead directly to lowered self-esteem. External attributions, however, would involve perceived causal elements in environmental factors, like academic climate in the particular department, logical reasons for low gratification from his specific research efforts, or the use of teaching methods which though generating low student interest can nevertheless be fine-tuned into methodologies more rewarding to professor and student alike.

Low vitality attributed to the four stable dimensions involves chronicity. These stable factors imply to the person that he will lack the controlling response in the future as well as now. Attributing cause to unstable factors might involve exhaustion, particular time of the year, or the cast of characters with whom he must work on committee matters this particular academic term. Note that unstable factors are episodic, or at least, very likely to change.

This model suggests the most insidious set of attributions would be global-internal-stable. Such attributions for the career-weary professor would involve such factors as : (global) "I lack vitality in several areas of my

life and teaching, a year from now I will be feeling just as unfulfilled as I do now"; (internal) "My personality and intellectual background aren't likely to bring me any ecstasy in teaching"; and (stable) "Since I've felt this way so long I'm sure these feelings will persist."

Implications of the Attribution Model

Conceptualizing career pressures with a model of perceived causes (i.e., attributions) for those devitalizing factors has a number of implications. A primary implication involves perceiving those pressures in ways which are not global-internal-stable (i.e. the most negatively-pervasive attribution) Seymour Sarason (1977) has described the academic profession as typifying the "one life, one career profession." He concludes that such a perception breeds the expectation that those in the profession can expect to spend their lives in pursuit of that profession and enjoy full and meaningful satisfaction culminating in a crescendo of gratification into retirement. He observes that people in professions requiring high levels of education, especially people entering medicine, the clergy and academics, are especially prone to "one-life, one career" perceptions. Such perceptions seem clearly to be global-internal-stable expectations about career development and vitality. When that vitality is not experienced could the perceived reasons for that lack of invigoration also be global-internal-stable? Are the same types of attributional processes likely to hold for conceptualizing a lack of vitality in a career as the types of attributions which were operating when entering the career? Rotter's (1975) emphasis on the vulnerability of highly internal people to uncontrollable adjustment factors may be a partial affirmative answer to this question.

Many professors entered the profession in the booming expansion of the 1950's and 1960's when mobility, salaries, advancement, and research monies were at their optimistic best. However the economic, social, and professional factors of the late 1970's and early 1980's have dramatically altered

the traditional attitudes and opportunities of the profession. Such unprecedented and major changes may tend to "push" the academic toward global attributions (pervasive perceptions of different areas of the person's life) and stable attributions (the perceived cause will last over considerable time). Consequently the real world of academic life may come to be experienced as being quite out of tune with the career the person prepared for. The extent to which this perception is disheartening can be conceptualized by this model--especially in the case of tenacity of causes which are perceived as global-internal-stable. The literature on learned-helplessness and locus of control, cited earlier, which underlie this model would predict resolution would begin as causal perceptions are shifted to any of the other seven attributional categories.

Recommendations

What are some specific steps which could alter these cognitive processes? That is, how can these attributions for decreased career vitality for the professor be moved to viewpoints which do not have the debilitating consequences of global-internal-stable attributions?

A. One major lesson of the adult development literature (e.g. Levinson, et al., 1978) is that times of satisfaction and stress are predictable in terms of various career stages. A clear understanding is needed by an academician of the ways his or her stress is: predictable given their career stage, shared by peers in the same stage, and resolvable by options appropriate to that stage. These views would be strong factors in moving the perspectives from global to specific attributions (i.e. relative to a particular career stage). Each career stage represents unique opportunities, needs, and possibilities for resolution of career stress.

B. Institutional policies could be examined in view of this attributional model. To what extent do policies/practices/administrative "positions"

reinforce the global-internal-stable perceptions of the faculty member suffering a degree of career malaise? A number of policy areas which would encourage any of the other seven, less restrictive, attributions would include: early retirement, employment after retirement, leaves without pay, recommending mandatory sabbaticals, employing professors in nonteaching support areas, off-campus consulting, summer internships, etc. A professor with a global-internal-stable perception of career dissatisfaction would be most unlikely to exert the initiative to obtain a sabbatical.

C. A number of institutions have utilized "growth contracting" or "professional development plans" (E.R.I.C./Higher Education, 1981). Funding is made available for support of professional and/or personal enhancement of the faculty member. These possible uses of the money are practically unrestricted. Restrictions are placed, however, on the application process. The professor must construct a rather complete plan for the up-coming year of professional growth based on an assessment of relevant personal and professional dimensions. This assessment must come substantially out of interaction with a group of colleagues, selected by the person, acting as a supportive, advisory, resource. This feedback from self-selected colleagues would be a potent source of input in altering negative attributions. Note from Table I that specific-external-unstable attributions would likely have the fewest negative consequences. An example would be: "I am not feeling as fulfilled as I'd like due limited (specific) factors in my environment (external) which are changeable (unstable)." The encouragement of colleagues and the 'carrot' of financing would tend to give such planning process the force of moving attributions to this more optimistic view of "Why am I unfilled in my job?"

D. Annual meetings with a sensitive department chairman may provide the supportive interaction to examine concerns about what could be happening to enhance the professor's gratification from the work setting. This focus would likely draw the person to consider more specific ("What can we do?") and

external ("Can the work setting be changed?") attributions for dealing with staleness.

E. Perceptions can also be altered by utilizing small groups of faculty to explore needs, options, resources, etc. related to career enhancing options. Such experiences may draw perceptions to specific-external views.

Possible options available may involve:

- --seeking some change in the current setting
  - --varying teaching methodologies
  - --teaching a new course--perhaps from a minor in the person's Ph.D. work
  - --consulting on campus
- --making minor changes in the current setting
  - --nonacademic responsibilities in the institution (advising, administration, etc.)
  - --leave of absence
  - --develop off-campus consulting (moonlighting)
- --change jobs within academic work
- --change job and career
- --develop part-time work in the institution and part-time in an external setting

F. Colleagues and administrators can encourage a fundamental view of the academic career as based on intellectual qualities (analytic, aesthetic, verbal, quantitative, theoretical, etc.). These qualities are readily needed for work in business, government, the clergy, as well as the university. The bed-rock assumption that the Ph.D. is qualified only to work in the academic setting would clearly encourage the detrimental global-internal-stable attributions for career stress. "The college is the only place I can work (global) because, afterall, I'm a Ph.D. (internal), consequently, any change in work setting or style is really unlikely (stable)."

G. Todd Furniss (1981) has provided a very insightful work, Reshaping Faculty Careers, which is built on a frequently unexamined premise.

> "The premise (of the book) is that faculty members individually and as representatives of a profession are almost by definition bright and competent. This statement is ensured by the processes of training and selection. If at some point in their careers they do not seem to show the ability and talent they had when they entered the profession, it is worth looking at the environment to see where it might be altered so as again to give them the chance to shine." (p. XIV)

It may also be useful to examine the professor's belief system (attributions) surrounding these situations. Resolution can result from changes in altered perceptions perhaps as well as in altered environment.

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